

MARCELLO ZAGO, OMI: BONDING PROCLAMATION, ECUMENISM AND DIALOGUE, *Ecumenical Trends* Vol. 41 (June 2012, 6): 12/92-15/95

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Archbishop Marcello Zago, OMI, died on March 1st, 2001, fourteen years after the first Assisi meeting of Oct. 27, 1986. He served as the right hand man of Blessed John Paul II in arranging the event.¹ For him, the Proclamation of Jesus as the only Savior was the overriding concern of Assisi. But he insisted also on the integrity of Interreligious Dialogue, being one of the modern founders of this discipline. In the process, he made valuable contributions to the dynamism of Ecumenism. We will show that both academically and pastorally, his major was Missiology, with a double minor in Dialogue, and Ecumenism. His views seem especially timely today, when Ecumenism is sometimes cut off from the energy of Proclamation, and the Dialogue with World Religions tends to absorb Ecumenism.

Ecumenism is generally acknowledged to have three main roots: the missionary concern over the effect of divisiveness (Proclamation), the concern for shared doctrine (Faith and Order) and the concern for social justice (Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation).² Zago underlined the importance of the missionary concern for a healthy Ecumenism, while insisting that Interreligious Dialogue enter into this framework.

Reflecting on the 1986 event, he stated:

Assisi has underlined both the convergences and the essential differences between Christian ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. The Christians prayed together first in the cathedral and then, during the common part of the program, in the presence of all the religious representatives. The kind of unity that already exists between Christians and that which they are still seeking is substantially different from that of the other believers. A conscious relationship to Christ affects prayer addressed to God—to whom all believers address themselves—and affects all mutual relationships. Christians are joined to each other, whereas other believers are ordained to the People of God. In my view, the following distinction made in two texts of Lumen Gentium needs to be pondered in depth: “The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honoured by the name Christian, but who do not however profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter’ (LG 15). Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways (LG 16).”³

Zago described many times the fact that the various Buddhist groups had not planned to pray together, until they discovered that the Christian Churches were going to pray together. He also stressed the formula that at Assisi, “we came together to pray, but we did not pray together.”⁴

Zago was born on Aug. 9, 1932, at Villorba, in northern Italy. He had completed two years of theology at the Treviso Major Seminary, when he decided to enter the novitiate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary

Immaculate, Ripalimosani, Italy, in 1955. He made his first vows on Sept. 29, 1956, and was assigned to the International (Roman) Scholasticate, taking classes at the University of St. Thomas (then known as the Angelicum). On May 22, 1959 he received his assignment for Laos, was ordained a priest on Sept. 13, 1959 and left for language studies in Southeast Asia. In 1961, he supervised Oblates doing their pastoral year, in Sriracha, Thailand. After working as both a missionary and seminary director in Laos, Zago returned to Rome in 1966. While a staff member at the International Scholasticate, he received a Doctorate in Missiology at the Gregorian University (Jesuit) with a thesis on Buddhist funeral rites.⁵

Returning to Laos in 1971, he started and directed the Buddhist Office of the Laos-Cambodian Bishops Conference, until 1974. In that capacity he guided the visit of the Lao Buddhist Patriarch and his delegation which Pope Paul VI received at the Vatican in 1973. This visit broke ground in many ways, as a preparation for the 1986 Assisi event.⁶ That same year he was named a Consultor to the Secretariate for Non-Christians (now the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue).

In 1974 Zago was teaching a course in Missiology at St. Paul University, Ottawa, Canada, in the Institute of Mission Studies, when the Oblate General Chapter elected him one of two Assistant Generals, a post he held until 1980. Bishop Jean-Pierre Urkia, Savannoklet, Laos, and the Federation of Asian Bishops chose him to be their expert (peritus) at the Synod on Evangelization (1974). From 1981-83, he was a full-time Professor of Missiology in both the Urban and Lateran Universities, and was serving as superior of the Italian Province's Scholasticate at Vermicino, when he was named, in 1983, to the full time position as Secretary of the Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. (In 1984, he was appointed Consultor to the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism, at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity).

Therefore from 1983-1986, Zago was the point person for developing the first Assisi event, and his council was the lead organization in the Vatican for organizing the event (in contrast to 2011, when the Council for Justice and Culture was the lead Vatican organization). When he was elected the eleventh superior general of the Oblates by the General Chapter on Sept. 13, 1986, he was told by Pope John Paul II to continue his full time work for Assisi. He subtly apologized to the Oblates and again brought up his ecumenical concern, in his letter to the Oblates of Dec., 1986:

You will have noticed that an Oblate presented to the Pope the 37 non-Christian delegations that had come from all over the world; that the same Oblate led the ten groups of different world religions to the prayer podium. That Oblate was your Superior General. Right from its very outset he had been involved in the organization of this historical event that has been described as the greatest significant step to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue⁷

Zago had two qualities which made his influence very widely felt. First was his ability to write in many languages constantly about his experiences with other religions. He penned over a thousand articles, with some being translations into major European languages. He wrote much about seminary training, and was concerned about the distribution of clergy throughout the world.⁸

Second was his personality, a Romanita which featured a great awareness of the Anglo-Saxon mind too. His keynote speeches at the American Society of Missiology annual meeting, June 19, 1999, and US Catholic Jubilee Mission Congress, Sept. 28, 2000, were delivered in flawless, even colloquial English.⁹ Remember that the American Society of Missiology describes itself as “an inclusive and diverse professional association made up of members from Independent (Evangelical, Pentecostal, etc.), Conciliar and Roman Catholic communions of the Christian Church.” Thus one third of its leadership comes from the Evangelical Churches, one third from main line Protestant Churches, and one third from the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰

Zago undoubtedly met evangelicals, especially in Asia, and knew how to work with this increasingly important section of the ecumenical world. People of other religions were naturally attracted to him, and it worked both ways. Professor Mitchell concluded “Zago had gained a great deal of personal enrichment from, and respect for, Buddhism.”¹¹

One of the more modern emphases which bonds Proclamation, Ecumenism and World Religions is that we exchange needed gifts. Those who proclaim Christ as Savior are not so much bringing Him to their listeners, as uncovering Him already there and learning from those to whom they proclaim. With Non-Catholic Christians, we especially recognize the gifts their Churches have, which we need for a complete Catholicism, even as we bring our gifts to the table. We approach non-Christian Religions, especially Judaism, with a respect and openness. In each of the three situations, the friendships formed are a priceless gift. Zago feely acknowledged that being in the presence of fervent Buddhists as they prayed helped him discover the depths of his own Christian prayer.¹²

On March 28, 1998, Zago was appointed Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, formerly known as Propagation of the Faith. This Vatican office oversees all the mission territories of the Catholic Church, and as secretary, Zago was the second most important person in the office. He was also the first from a religious community to hold this office. His earlier writings received a certain approval from this appointment. His relationship with the Prefect of the Congregation, Cardinal Jozef Tomko, seems to have been excellent.¹³

His most interesting writing directly concerning ecumenism was a short study article in the review Omnis Terra, concerning the missionary dimension of the only encyclical on Ecumenism, John Paul II's That All May Be One. Zago began by observing that the title of the encyclical is taken from the famous missionary verse of Jesus' priestly prayer, “that all may be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jo. 17:21). Missionary ecumenists formed as Zago was, are quick to note if the second part of the verse, concerning the missionary dimension, is not used in ecumenical prayer services. The second part reminds us of the goal and dynamism of Ecumenism: Proclamation. He stated “The unity of Christ's disciples is indicated as a condition for missionary effectiveness.”¹⁴

Zago simply observed that the encyclical does not discuss very much “one of the greatest problems in modern missionary activity,” and “a source of anxiety ... for those involved in ecumenism.” Proselytism and the ecumenical indifference of some Christian groups “ persists above all in traditionally Catholic

areas, and ... has increased in the last two decades.”¹⁵ The fundamentalism of some Christian Churches is a frustration both for ecumenists and missionaries.

Noting that the ecumenical movement started in the Churches of the Reformation “because of the demands of missionary activity,” Zago comments on this feature of the encyclical (#’s 8,9,10). Then he insists “in Catholicism ecumenical consciousness grew together with missionary consciousness,” and he proceeds to examine how the 1990 encyclical On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio) is linked constantly with this encyclical on ecumenism. Here he underlines John Paul II’s hope that the front against “Christian and para-Christian sects ... sowing confusion” will be made ecumenically.¹⁶

Zago supervised the document which came in 1991 from both the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: Dialogue and Proclamation. This document anticipated in many ways John Paul II’s missionary encyclical and was actually circulated before the encyclical.¹⁷ So his contribution in 1993 to the Orbis book, “Commentary on Redemptoris Missio” explains both the 1991 document, and the pope’s encyclical.¹⁸ “Commentary” is probably the most easily accessible of his writings, which shows his great ability to synthesize and organize many themes and insights. Editor and former missionary William Burrows noted that Zago’s article is “an authoritative commentary on it (the encyclical) by its behind-the-scenes drafter.”¹⁹ Zago constantly integrated Ecumenism with Proclamation and Dialogue and other themes, but he explicitly prefers an Asian term from his many years of experience on that continent: “harmony.”²⁰

In 1998, a position paper he presented at the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “The Spirituality of Dialogue,” received much praise.²¹ With “Spiritual Ecumenism” assuming such importance today, Zago’s position paper is remarkable for not speaking of Catholicism, but of Christianity (#’s 4.6 and 5 especially).

Zago’s keynote presentation to the US Catholic Mission Congress 2000 was followed by a response from his good friend and colleague Methodist missionary Dr. Gerard Anderson. It is significant that a Methodist reminded Catholics that only one diocesan Catholic seminary in all the USA had followed John Paul II’s request for a course incorporating Proclamation, Ecumenism and Dialogue.²²

It is evident from Zago’s extensive personal diary that, especially during the time preparing for the 1986 Assisi meeting, he could pick up the phone in the Vatican and have the World Council of Churches officials in Geneva immediately considering his request for advice and for Protestant participation. June 10, 1986, for example, he spent in Geneva.²³ For him, ecumenism was personal and deep, part of his “harmony” of bonding Proclamation, Ecumenism and Dialogue. Each has its own discipline and integrity, each must be in good relations with the other two and each needs the other two in order to be healthy.

In 1987, Zago wrote an article for Oblates in the USA “Towards a Wider Ecumenism,” which ended with a reflection on the 1986 Assisi meeting:

In some way the day in Assisi translated what the church is called to be according to Vatican Council II. It was the bond of unity among all Christians who prayed individually and together as one religion in the cathedral of San Ruffino, and later in presence of the believers of other religions in the upper basilica of St. Francis. It was also the leading and convoking force for all believers who prayed within the walls of the seraphic city, first in separate places and then in the basilica in the respectful presence of others. The pilgrimage of the various groups towards the upper basilica of St. Francis was the image of the road towards a common goal, a prelude to that peace which will bring the pilgrimage to an end in the attainment of the common goal.²⁴

For members of his missionary order, his pilgrimage here ended too quickly. But for Missionary Oblates of Mary, and for all Christians, and for all people of faith, both his life and writings are helping us attain the goal Zago worked for. May we too work for the harmony of Proclamation, Ecumenism and Dialogue.

¹. Professor Donald Mitchell wrote "He was one of the persons most responsible for the 1986 Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi," "In Memoriam: Archbishop Marcello Zago," Monastic Dialogue Bulletin 67 (October 2001)1. For Zago's own description of the event, see "Day of Prayer for Peace," Bulletin du Secretariat pour les non-chretiens, 22 (Rome 1987): 145-55; also Kerygma 20 (Ottawa, 1987): 97-106.

². Proclamation of Jesus as the only Savior, Missiology, Evangelization, and Witness are all the same reality, but with different emphases. For the relationship, see John Paul II, On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio), Dec. 7, 1980, especially #'s 41, 44. Two other concerns have influenced ecumenism: the effort towards world peace, and the international Christian youth movement.

³. Marcello Zago, OMI, "Day of Prayer for Peace," Kerygma 21 (1987):105.

⁴. Ibid, 99. The religions of India were also influenced to pray together. The prayer formula was carefully explained many times,

⁵. Marcello Zago OMI, Rites et ceremonies en milieu bouddhiste lao (Rome: Gregorian University, 1972), #6 in the series of missionary documentation.

⁶. John Borelli, then of the US. Catholic Bishops Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, gave me in 1995 the vivid description Zago wrote of this: "Visit of the Lao Buddhist Patriarch to Rome

and Some Places in Italy, 7-18 June 1973," Bull. Sec. pro non christianis 8(1973)90-101 (now called Pro Dialogo). See also Zago, "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in South-East Asia," Buddhism and Christianity, Concilium 116 (1979): 107-18 (eds Claude Geffre and Mariasusai Dhavamony, Crossroad/Seabury, NY).

⁷. Marcello Zago OMI, "The Superior General's First Letter to the Oblates," OMI Information 240/86 (Dec. 1986):2.

⁸. See the Oblate French-English periodical Vie Oblate Life 62:3 (2003) for the bibliography, and many articles describing Zago's accomplishments: <http://www.omiworld.org>, click on Vie Oblate Life, search for 62/3 2003. A shorter bibliography is included in Harry Winter, "Marcello Zago (1932--), Assisi and Interreligious Dialogue," Oblate Missiologists, 1997 pp. 43-50. You will have greater success simply putting the title Oblate Missiologists in your search engine, than using www.harrywinter.org/oblate%20missiologists.html.

⁹. Marcello Zago OMI, "Issues Shaping the Encounter of the Gospel with Other Religions in the New Millennium," Missiology 28 (Jan. 2000, #1): 5-18; Zago, "Global Integration of Catholic Missions in the United States Today," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 25 (2001, April, #2):2-6.

¹⁰. <http://www.asmweb.org>.

¹¹. Mitchell, "In Memoriam," Monastic Dialogue Bulletin 67:1.

¹². Marcello Zago O.M.I., "The Missionary Importance of the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint," Omnis Terra #263 (Dec. 1995):488.

¹³. See Willi Henkel, OMI, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Legacy+of+Marcello+Zago,+O.M.I.-a0173923104>.

¹⁴. Zago, "The Missionary Importance," p. 489.

¹⁵. *ibid*, citing John Paul II, On the Permanent Validity, #50.

¹⁶. See especially #'s 30, 36 and 50 for the integration of Ecumenism, Proclamation and Dialogue. Zago practically authored these paragraphs: Willi Henkel, O.M.I., "Archbishop Marcello Zago's Contribution to Missiology," Vie Oblate Life 62 (2003, #3):384-93.

¹⁷. Secretariate for Non Christian Religions, Dialogue and Proclamation, 1991, see #4.

¹⁸. Marcello Zago O.M.I., "Commentary on Redemptoris Missio," pp. 56-90, in William R. Burrows, ed., Redemption and Dialogue (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); reissued in 2009 Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock.

¹⁹. Burrows, "Catholics, Carey's 'Means,' and Twenty-first-Century Mission," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 34 (July, 2010, 3):138n.17.

²⁰. Zago, "Commentary," Redemption and Dialogue, p. 61.

²¹. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "The Spirituality of Dialogue," Pro Dialogo 1999, pp. 233-47; also available in OMI DOCUMENTATION #240 (English), May 2001, 23 pp. The change of using Christian for Catholic began very noticeably in the 1991 document Dialogue and Proclamation: #7 and has continued through the January 2011 document issued by the Vatican, the WCC and the World Evangelical Alliance, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct," Ecumenical Trends 41 (Jan. 2011):14/46-15/47.

²². Gerald Anderson, "Response to Marcello Zago, O.M.I." International Bulletin of Missionary Research 25 (Jan. 2001, 1):8. Anderson did find two signs of hope. First, the growing number of Catholic women in missiology and secondly another Oblate's "eloquent address to the International Association of Catholic Missiologists meeting in Rome in February 1999:" Cardinal Francis George, O.M.I., "The Promotion of Missiological Studies in Seminaries," Mission Studies 16-2, #32 (1999):13-27.

²³. Aloysius Kedi O.M.I. describes these diaries extensively: "Father Marcello Zago's Role in the Celebration of the 1986 Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi," Vie Oblate Life 65 (2006,1):30-32. Zago did work extensively with Father Pierre Duprey (later bishop) of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

²⁴. Marcello Zago, "Towards a Wider Ecumenism," Mission/Unity 26 (Dec. 1987) 2. This was the only one of the 45 issues of the USA Oblate ecumenical newsletter Mission/Unity to receive an "observation" from the Vatican. Zago had chosen the title, and Duprey wrote me (21 March 1989) reminding me that the Vatican and World Council of Churches wanted "ecumenism" to refer only to Christians. On p. 1, Zago explained how "a Buddhist monk, my friend," helped him during a day of meditation regarding peace.